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Human Rights are our mainstay against unbridled power

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DELIVERED BY

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AT

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Global Update

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Next month will mark two years since I took up my position as High Commissioner.

For this Global Update, I would therefore like to depart from the usual listing of various country situations and offer some broader reflections about the state of human rights today, at the mid-way point of my mandate.

It seems to me we are at a fork in the road. We can either continue on our current path – a treacherous ‘new normal’ – and sleepwalk into a dystopian future. Or we can wake up and turn things around for the better, for humanity and the planet.

The ‘new normal’ cannot be endless, vicious military escalation and increasingly horrifying, technologically “advanced” methods of warfare, control, and repression.

The ‘new normal’ cannot be continued indifference to deepening inequalities within and between States.

It cannot be the free-for-all spread of disinformation, smothering facts and the ability to make free and informed choices. Heated rhetoric and simplistic fixes, erasing context, nuance, and empathy. Paving the way for hate speech and the dire consequences that inevitably follow.

The ‘new normal’ cannot mean accepting the injustice, driven by greed, that the triple planetary crisis affects those who are the least responsible the most. Or that sustainable development remains elusive for so many.

The ‘new normal’ cannot be that national sovereignty is twisted to shroud – or excuse – horrific violations.

Or the discrediting of multilateral institutions or attempts to rewrite the international rules, chipping away at universally agreed norms.

This cannot be the world we want – as individuals, for our families and loved ones, for our societies, and for our global community and future generations.

We can and must make a different choice.

Reconnect with our common humanity, nature, and our planet.

In other words, we could choose to be guided by human rights and the universal values that we all share.

Mr. President,

Human rights are not in crisis. But political leadership needed to make them a reality is.

In every region around the world, we see deep-seated power dynamics at play to grab or hold on to power, at the expense of universal human rights.

Despite some important advancements, 30 years after the universal commitments on women’s rights in Beijing, the shadow of patriarchy still looms large. We are seeing alarming regressions on gender equality issues we thought had been settled years ago. At their most extreme, for

example in **Afghanistan**, despicable laws and policies are effectively erasing women from public life.

But everywhere, insidiously, hate and subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, misogyny online and offline are almost normalised. Women experience higher poverty rates than men in most parts of the world. Gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, is devastatingly frequent and remains largely hidden. Justice for victims and prevention efforts are woefully inadequate, in stark contradiction with the promise that “all human beings are born free and equal.”

Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance continue to plague societies, propped up by entrenched power structures, vested interests, institutional inertia and harmful stereotypes, often rooted in legacies of colonialism and enslavement. Despite some progress, it remains uneven and insufficient. In far too many States, across all regions, we see, as a result, deepening socio-economic inequalities. There is also a dearth of data-driven policies, which are crucial for transparency and accountability to address these phenomena.

Later this session, I will present my report on systemic racism and multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by Africans and people of African descent.

Then there are those politicians, amplified by some media outlets, who scapegoat migrants, refugees, and minorities, as we have seen, for example, around electoral periods in **Austria, France, Germany, Hungary**, the **United Kingdom** and the **United States of America**, to name a few. They capitalize on anxiety and despair, pitting one group against the other, and they seek to distract and divide. History has shown us that hateful words can trigger hateful actions. Political leadership grounded in human rights and evidence-based debate are the antidote to all of this. This is the only way to tackle the real challenges that people face in areas such as health, housing, employment and social protection.

Despite the significant, and welcome, global shift towards decriminalization of consensual same-sex relations, we see a spate of laws being adopted to establish or expand criminal sanctions in some countries, such as in **Ghana, Indonesia, Iraq, and Uganda** contrary to the

basic universal norms which States have agreed. At the end, such policies harm societies as a whole, leaving people behind.

Mr. President,

On the death penalty, the overall positive trend towards its abolition worldwide is marred by a substantial increase in executions in a limited number of States, such as the **Islamic Republic of Iran**, particularly for drug-related crimes, but also **Saudia Arabia**. This has resulted in a steady increase in the number of people known to have been executed worldwide. It will be important to tackle this head-on, and to provide the evidence and the policy arguments so that this trend can be reversed again.

Societies are by nature in constant evolution. But rather than embracing this creatively we see attempts to muzzle freedoms of expression, assembly and association and a free press, including in electoral contexts. Such freedoms are, however, crucial for critical debate, to bring out the best in societies and to find solutions to the manifold problems we face. Examples include detention of journalists in **Azerbaijan**; arrests, detention, and harassment of political opponents in **Mali, Uganda** and **Venezuela**; arrests and detention of political opponents and activists in **Tunisia**; persecution of political opponents and journalists in **Nicaragua**; and crackdowns on activists in **Viet Nam**. In **China**, undue restrictions on civic space continue to be imposed in the name of national security and social stability.

Mr. President,

'State capture' in its various forms is an abuse of power, with serious consequences for human rights.

Powerful economic and political actors take control of what should be independent State institutions, such as the judiciary or electoral commissions. They silence critical voices and plunder resources purely for their own political and financial gain.

We see this, for instance, in **Guatemala** where the criminal law and its processes are abused by some official actors, such as the Attorney General, to pressure and persecute those involved in defending human

rights and promoting accountability.

In some instances, segments of the private sector engage in the illegal trade of a nation's resources to the detriment of the country's development and its population, as widely reported, for example, in the **Central African Republic** or eastern **Democratic Republic of Congo**. It is also an endemic problem in Latin America, including in **Brazil** and **Peru**.

Mr. President,

I also wish to warn about newer forms of power, wielded on peoples' lives and on our 'global public square' through improperly or insufficiently regulated digital technologies. This also includes the wholesale exploitation of our data.

Human rights, including protecting free expression and privacy, must be front and centre in efforts to regulate digital technologies, while helping ensure that online violence, disinformation, hate speech and incitement to hatred are stopped in their tracks. We must actively ensure that the benefits of digital technologies and artificial intelligence are accessible to those most in need, to help reduce global inequalities and close digital divides. The Global Digital Compact therefore needs to be anchored firmly in the normative human rights framework.

Mr. President,

I have been speaking about the negative impact on peoples' rights of entrenched power structures, and of the misuse of power. And yet, movements such as those against apartheid, racism, for women's rights, for environmental rights, and many others have shown us how human rights can trigger positive change in society, steering us towards greater justice and stability.

Human rights are regulators and correctors of power dynamics gone awry.

Recently in **Bangladesh**, for example, the student movement carried human rights as its torch. The country, now, has an opportunity to chart a new future, with the interim Government making publicly clear its commitment to a peaceful and inclusive process grounded in human

rights and the rule of law. My Office is supporting the authorities, including by conducting an independent fact-finding mission into recent alleged human rights violations, and on accountability, processes of reconciliation and healing, and other essential, long-delayed reforms.

More broadly, with some elections already having taken place, and others still to come this year, I urge all voters to keep in mind the issues that matter most to them – be it a home, education for their children, their health or job, justice, their family and loved ones, the environment, to be free from violence, tackling corruption, being heard.

These are all human rights issues.

I urge voters to ask themselves which of the political platforms or candidates will work for the human rights of everyone.

Which will promote equality of opportunity and strive to foster economies that offer decent work for decent pay?

Which of the political parties have human rights and solidarity as part of their vision, rather than undermining them?

And I urge all voters to be vigilant. Be wary of the shrill voices, the ‘strongman’ types that throw glitter in our eyes, offering illusory solutions that deny reality. As I said earlier, know that when one group is singled out as a scapegoat for society’s ills, one day your own might be next.

Mr. President,

75 years ago, States adopted the four Geneva Conventions, elaborating laws of war that they agreed to uphold, in the wake of the horrors and devastation of two world wars. And almost 80 years ago, they adopted the UN Charter, promising ‘to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war’.

And yet, here we are.

With a crossing of innumerable red lines, or readiness to toe right up to them.

Almost two years ago in **Sudan**, where I undertook my first visit as High

Commissioner, there was hope. Today, the country is experiencing one of the world's worst humanitarian and protection crises, fueled by longstanding impunity, a firestorm of zero-sum power struggles, competing economic interests and instrumentalization of ethnic tensions. Estimates suggest that over 20,000 people have been killed. The world cannot let this continue.

We *know* that wars spill over, and into, future generations, fostering repeated cycles of hatred if their causes remain unaddressed.

Sadly, the war in **Gaza** is the quintessential example.

Since the horrific 7 October attacks claimed the lives of over 1,200 victims in **Israel** and injured many others, over 40,000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces, several thousand injured, and thousands remain under the rubble in Gaza. Each day, Palestinians struggle to survive. Nearly 1.9 million people have been forcibly displaced across the strip, many multiple times. Eleven months on, 101 Israeli hostages are still held to be in Gaza. While the actual number is likely higher, almost 10,000 Palestinians are held in Israeli prisons or *ad hoc* military facilities, many arbitrarily, with over 50 people having died due to inhumane conditions and ill-treatment. In the West Bank, deadly and destructive operations, some at a scale not witnessed in the last two decades, are worsening a calamitous situation there, already aggravated by serious settler violence.

Ending that war and averting a full-blown regional conflict is an absolute and urgent priority. Equally, the wider situation of illegality across the occupied Palestinian territory deriving from Israel's policies and practices, as so clearly spelled out by the International Court of Justice in its Advisory Opinion in July, must be comprehensively addressed.

States must not – cannot – accept blatant disregard for international law, including binding decisions of the Security Council and orders of the International Court of Justice, neither in this nor any other situation.

In **Ukraine**, civilians are trapped in cycles of terror, through ongoing attacks by the **Russian Federation** striking civilian facilities like hospitals, schools, and supermarkets, and repeated waves of targeting of energy infrastructure leading to country-wide blackouts. I fear for Ukrainians this

coming winter. Troubled by the impact of the recent escalations on civilians, including in Kursk, my Office has pursued access to all affected areas to be able to monitor the human rights situation. I regret the Russian Federation has so far declined to grant such access to relevant areas.

Myanmar's crisis continues to plumb the depths of inhumanity, with recent air strikes, mass arrests and reports of extrajudicial killings continuing unabated, amidst stifling impunity. Civilians are paying the heaviest price, with some of the highest numbers of civilian casualties being reported since the current crisis began in 2021, and the Rohingya community violently cornered in northern Rakhine State, with nowhere safe to turn.

In many of these situations, even minimal humanitarian aid to civilians is instrumentalized, diverted or indeed blocked altogether, as is access for human rights monitors. For those of us engaged in this work, it is as if we are standing on the banks of a river watching people drown, with lifebuoys piled at our feet.

In other cases, violence is directed at the human rights and humanitarian system, as with the outrageous detention of UN staff in **Yemen**. UN staff and humanitarian workers must never be targeted.

I will provide dedicated updates on many of these and other situations later this session.

Excellencies,

States themselves have designed international human rights and humanitarian law to preserve and guarantee our common humanity.

These norms are our mainstay against unbridled power.

All parties to conflicts and other States, particularly those with influence, must do everything they can to put an end to violations.

One concrete action would be for States, in line with their obligations under the Geneva Conventions and human rights due diligence, to refrain from exporting or transferring arms to a party to an armed conflict, where

there is a real risk that they would be used in breach of international humanitarian law. I am encouraged that some States have already taken steps in this direction.

Mr. President,

Human rights work is crucial to peace.

To preventing conflict in the first place.

To providing early warning signals when conflict is likely to erupt.

To establishing objective, reliable facts of what has happened in the fog of war, with a view to achieving truth and justice for every victim, the day after.

And to ensuring peace negotiations are inclusive and acceptable to all parties, and therefore truly sustainable.

Peace accords throughout the 1990s, from countries in the former Yugoslavia to **Guatemala** and **Cambodia** showed the value of integrating human rights. In **Liberia** too, human rights principles were transformative in peace processes, particularly promoting women's participation.

My Office was directly involved in negotiations of the 2016 Peace Agreement in **Colombia**, and we are still present in the country, to help integrate the human rights dimension – most recently, to provide guidance on dismantling criminal organizations and supporting transitional justice institutions.

I also welcome the progress **Nepal** is making to establish the transitional justice bodies envisaged in the 2006 peace accords.

We also must unite in support of justice – nationally and globally.

The watershed moments of the Nuremberg Trials, and the judgments of the ICTY and of the ICTR, in Sierra Leone and Cambodia, before the ICC and national courts by dint of universal jurisdiction, are clear messages to perpetrators: once you have committed this type of crime, there is always the risk of accountability becoming personal.

A clear and comprehensive normative framework here is key. I therefore welcome current efforts of States to fill a gap in that existing structure, and to advance negotiations on a Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Humanity.

Mr. President,

Instability at home fuels global instability.

Conversely, solidarity and cohesion within countries form a solid foundation for international cooperation.

As States acknowledged in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action in 1993, the promotion and protection of all human rights is a legitimate concern of the international community.

As High Commissioner, I remain committed to advancing a vision of human rights for the 21st century that is solution-oriented, forward-looking and unifying. And that speaks to every human being directly.

International cooperation, grounded in human rights, is the channel we have to effect change and to address the massive challenges of our time.

Multilateral institutions, including the international human rights system, are at the disposal of the international community: to enable dialogue, with greater representativeness, to address the roots of mistrust, and to facilitate progress. And importantly, to be the voice of reason, based on evidence and facts, in our turbulent times, developing much needed longer-term thinking and providing concrete solutions to concrete problems.

It is therefore pivotal fully to embrace the opportunities offered by the human rights ecosystem, including my Office, and to ensure that human rights are bolstered and strongly integrated in the upcoming Pact for the Future. This is a plea I make to each and every delegation here today, at this critical juncture of the negotiations.

You have built this formidable normative architecture ‘in larger freedom’, and for good reason. Use and reinforce it – in good faith and with humility, since nothing can be taken for granted.

Mr. President,

Going forward, I like to be transparent about my approach to my mandate, about the challenges, and the opportunities.

I believe in engagement, frank exchanges and keeping dialogue open, even more so in the face of fierce disagreement.

We need to overcome absolutist approaches, the 'us versus them' mentality and the lack of nuance. The world is far too complex.

It is my duty to speak out publicly, whenever necessary, to achieve the greatest positive impact.

Human rights are meant to challenge our own assumptions and identify the blind spots. They are meant to encourage self-critical reflection because no one is perfect.

Selectivity and inconsistent standards serve no one – and certainly not victims of human rights violations.

The argument that we should only focus on the biggest crises of the day doesn't hold for the human rights cause.

Because human rights 'begin in small places, close to home' [Eleanor Roosevelt].

And human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent.

It is important for me to understand when – and why – some States resist engaging meaningfully with my Office. And some only come to us when they have a problem elsewhere. So, it will remain my priority to assure all States of the value of engaging with my Office and the human rights system as a whole, not for engagement's sake, but to achieve tangible progress.

Internally, we have devoted considerable time to designing an organizational plan to make UN Human Rights Office more effective and responsive, fit for purpose to deliver on the many expectations you have of us and the requests for assistance, support and advice that we receive. We need your active funding, and strategic and political support to help us

implement it.

Governments and other actors will not always like what we have to say. That is inherent to the very nature of human rights. But I urge you not to kill the messenger, and instead to focus on furthering our fundamental common objective: the promotion and protection of human rights for everyone, everywhere.

My Office will continue to work tirelessly in support of victims everywhere. I urge you all to make use of this institution to the fullest, because a strong UN Human Rights Office and a healthy, well-resourced human rights ecosystem, are of global interest and benefit. And represent an extraordinary return on investment at a tiny fraction of the resources so readily devoted elsewhere.

Collectively, we should make the choice of rejecting the ‘new normal’ and the dystopian future it would present. Let us embrace and trust the full power of human rights as the path to the world we want – more peaceful, just, fair, and sustainable

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